



THE 1920s

MODERNISM AT A CROSSROADS

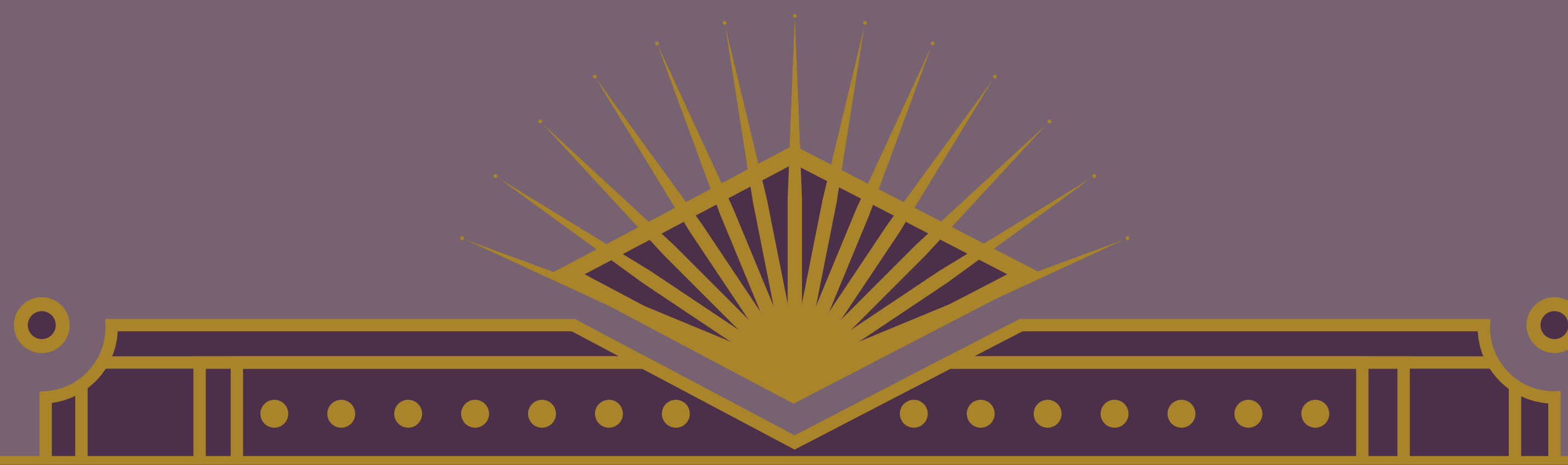
*I asked myself over and over
whether America had gone crazy...*

– A Returning American, “Home!” in *Atlantic Monthly*, 1926

The 1920s have a reputation as the most celebratory decade of the twentieth century, when music, fashion, and dance contributed to “The Roaring Twenties.” While American popular culture experienced dramatic changes during the 1920s, social and political conflict abounded. As the age of modernism emerged, newfound freedoms collided with staunch acts of retrogression. New literary

and artistic expression reflected a society forever changed by World War I, but the increased movement of people and cultures intensified feelings of nationalism. This exhibition explores these cultural and literary tensions through topical modules, artifacts, and an interactive station. As you experience this exhibit, notice the “push-pull” interplay at work in 1920s society and consider how the world has changed over the last one hundred years.





SETTING THE STAGE

After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

—T.S. Eliot, "Gerontion," 1920

Nestled in between the First World War and the Great Depression, the 1920s saw significant social and economic changes in the United States and around the world. In the aftermath of WWI, pessimism and political apathy prevailed as people from all nations struggled to come to terms with the atrocities of The Great War. Business boomed on American soil, heightening the gap between the wealthy and the impoverished. At the same time, great movements of people

took place, as African Americans in the South fled racial violence and economic oppression in the South as part of the first Great Migration. European immigrants arrived in large numbers but were stifled by the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924, which imposed strict limits on the number of Italian and Jewish immigrants from Europe and effectively blocked Asian immigrants. Many disillusioned American writers and artists fled to cities such as Paris and became members of the Lost Generation.





THE “MODERN” HUMAN

I am compelled to fear that science will be used to promote the power of dominant groups...

—Bertrand Russell, *Icarus or The Future of Science*, 1924

Scientific activity during the 1920s was a topic of public interest and controversy. Americans became more aware of the existence of calories, new vitamins, and vaccines such as penicillin. Magazines and other print culture featured Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein, whose revolutionary theories in physics and psychoanalysis changed the world. At the same time, pseudo-scientific theories gained traction. The

study of eugenics and social engineering permeated the scientific community and incited discriminatory practices such as forced sterilizations. Some advocates for birth control drew on eugenics theories and feminist arguments to present this controversial issue to the public. At the 1925 Scopes Trial, modern science clashed with fundamentalist understandings of religion in a public manner.





SOCIETY AND CULTURE

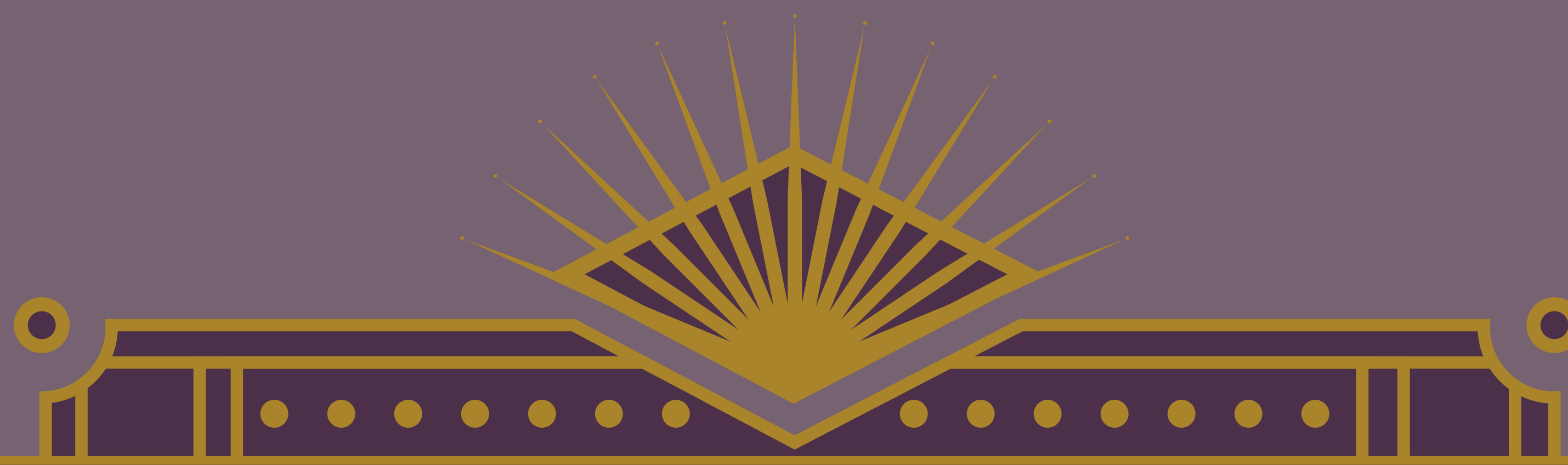
*It was an age of miracles, it was
an age of art, it was an age of excess,
and it was an age of satire.*

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” 1931

The “Jazz Age” culture of the 1920s idolized youth, freedom, materialism, and fast-paced living. Americans of all ages enjoyed radio technology, vaudeville shows, and cinemas, and consumers found beauty remedies and business-driven innovations such as cars and portable typewriters through widespread advertisements. Amid this cultural freedom, a drastic change to the American lifestyle took effect in January 1920, when the sale and

transportation of alcohol became illegal. Feminists campaigning for temperance and women’s suffrage celebrated this victory at the beginning of the decade yet also found themselves at odds with the burgeoning image of the liberated and highly sexualized woman, or “flapper.” Women also experienced liberation through convenience foods such as Aunt Jemima’s pancake mix. This popular product freed women from the burden of home cooking yet perpetuated the stereotype of subservient African Americans.





LITERARY TRENDS AND PUBLISHERS

I too, am America.

—Langston Hughes, "I Too," 1925

Literature of the 1920s voiced the thoughts and emotions of new and diverse cultural movements. Nashville's Fugitive Movement highlighted southern values through poetry. The Fugitives rejected industrialization and encouraged a return to traditional, agrarian lifestyles. The Harlem Renaissance, on the other hand, embraced urbanization and birthed a new generation of creative and politically conscious African American writers and artists. Influenced by European artistic

movements, modernist literature radically opposed traditional forms of writing and instead relied on free verse, disconnected imagery, and unpredictable combinations of language. At the heart of these movements were publishing companies, such as Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., which brought new literature to mainstream audiences. Knopf was one of the most prestigious publishing houses in the United States during the twentieth century and published many works by African Americans and women.

